DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 508 EC 309 519

AUTHOR	Luecking, Richard G.; Mooney, Marianne
TITLE	Tapping Employment Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities by Engaging Effectively with Employers. Research to Practice Brief.
INSTITUTION	National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, Minneapolis, MN.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	8p.; Volume 1, Issue 3.
CONTRACT	H326J000005
AVAILABLE FROM	National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET), Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 6 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr., SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455. Tel: 612-624-2097; Fax: 612-624-9344; e-mail: ncset@umn.edu; Web site: http://www.ncset.org. For full text: http://www.ncset.org.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Attitude Change; *Attitudes toward Disabilities; *Disabilities; *Education Work Relationship; *Employer Attitudes; Employer Employee Relationship; Employment Practices; Partnerships in Education; *School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; *Supported Employment; Work Experience Programs

ABSTRACT

This information brief discusses the benefits of work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities and the need to facilitate work experiences. It begins by examining employer perceptions of hiring and accommodating individuals with disabilities and stresses the need for refocused employment advocacy that is conducted less as a promotion of disability in the workplace, but more in the context of how the employers' enterprises will be affected positively by particular workers and by those professionals who prepare and assist these individuals for the workplace. Competencies that benefit both youth with disabilities and potential employers are identified and include: (1) identify return on investment for companies who participate in work experience programs and hire youth; (2) identify employer needs and market student skills that complement these needs; (3) help manage any changes that might occur as a result of the implementation of workplace supports and accommodations; (4) identify workplace supports, interventions, and accommodations that also contribute to improvement of companies' overall operational and organizational processes; (5) interact comfortably and productively with employers and speak their language; and (6) make employer participation convenient through well-identified and easy contact and follow-up procedures. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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NCSET Research to Practice Brief

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December 2002/Vol. 1, Issue 3

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Research to Practice Brief

Improving Secondary Education and Transition Services through Research • December 2002 • Vol. 1 • Issue 3

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

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Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports (RRTC), University of Hawai'i at Manoa

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PACER Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Institute for Educational Leadership, Center for Workforce Development, Washington, DC

National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Alexandria, Virginia

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Washington, DC

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Tapping Employment Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities by Engaging Effectively with Employers

By Richard G. Luecking and Marianne Mooney

The Problem

Individuals with disabilities continue to experience a host of barriers to participation in work-based learning opportunities, employment, and careers (National Council on Disability, 2000). Consequently, postschool unemployment remains disproportionately high for youth with disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Advances in instructional strategies and technologies continue to be made in the accommodations and supports that help young individuals with disabilities to succeed in the workplace (e.g., Rogan, Banks, & Howard, 2000). These advances, along with legal protections from discrimination available through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the promotion of work experience by legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), create an environment in which young job seekers with disabilities can better promote their skills and advocate for necessary accommodations. However, in a climate of expanding knowledge of workplace support and accommodation, and therefore theoretically better employment opportunities, unemployment remains a reality for many individuals with disabilities seeking employment.

Early exposure to the workplace can improve the employment outcomes for persons with disabilities by enabling youth to develop employment skills and identify a career direction. Studies show that work-based learning experience, especially paid work integrated into curriculum, leads to improved postschool employment outcomes for all youth with disabilities, regardless of primary disability label or required level of support (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997). Despite the demonstrated value of work-based learning experiences for youth with disabilities, participation in these experiences remains low (Colley & Jamison, 1998). It is clear that attention needs to be focused not only on workplace preparation of youth, but also on the workplaces themselves. Work-based learning experiences are based on available and willing employers. Examining employer perceptions of hiring and accommodating individuals with disabilities is an important consideration in making work-based learning opportunities available to youth with disabilities. This information can be used to improve the processes of establishing work-based experiences, identifying necessary workplaces supports, and eventually securing successful adult employment.

Employer Perspectives on Disability in the Workplace

Historically, conflicting outlooks on disability and contradictory approaches to the concept of disability have characterized employer perceptions. For example, Hernandez (2000) conducted a literature review of 37 studies of employer attitudes concerning the hiring and accommodation of workers with disabilities and found that employers express generally positive attitudes toward workers with disabilities, and express affirmative and humane views about disability. However, when attitudes toward specific disabilities were assessed, some disabilities, notably mental illness and mental retardation, were viewed more negatively than others. Hernandez uncovered findings that affirmed other reviews indicating that when appropriate supports were provided, employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities improved, and that employers with prior positive contact held more favorable attitudes toward workers with disabilities. Overall, this review concluded that employers' expressed willingness to hire applicants with disabilities still exceeded actual hiring practices.

Employers often fail to recognize individuals with disabilities as an important part of a community's available labor pool. When they are aware of this available labor resource, employers typically feel unprepared to adequately support the employment needs of individuals with disabilities (Butterworth & Pitt-Catsouphes, 1997). A study conducted by Fabian, Luecking, and Tilson (1995) asked a similar question of employers, disability employment specialists, and individuals with disabilities: What factors contribute to the successful employment of individuals with disabilities? Overwhelmingly, individuals with disabilities and disability employment specialists identified employers' understanding attitudes and flexibility to make accommodations. By contrast, employers pointed to quality service from employment specialists and the competence of particular workers as contributing factors in successful employment. These findings suggest the need for refocused employment advocacy that is conducted less as a promotion of disability in the workplace, but more in the context of how the employers' enterprises will be affected positively by particular workers and by those professionals who prepare and assist these individuals for the workplaces.

In fact, there is a history of research that supports the notion that company hiring decisions are less likely to be influenced by the presence or absence of disability than by potential contribution by a job candidate to the company, especially when it is clear that value is being added to the employer's enterprise (e.g., Luecking, 2000; Unger, 1999; Kiernan & Schlalock, 1989). More pressing concerns to employers are often simply matching a person to a specific company need, irrespective of the presence of a disability or need for accommodation. In a variety of studies employers have clearly expressed their need to recruit and retain workers with specific skills or the ability to acquire these skills. Also, through a variety of work and school-to-work transition programs, they have demonstrated their willingness, under the right conditions and with available and competent assistance, to bring persons with disabilities into the workplace, regardless of the level of support needed for initial training and follow-up supervision. The fact that unemployment remains at unacceptably low levels for individuals with disabilities suggests a continuing need to more skillfully interact with employers and to elevate the field's competence in marketing its mission to employers.

Implications for Transition Practice and Employment Services for Youth with Disabilities

One must assume that the persistently low rates of employment for individuals with disabilities are not due to inherent or pervasive unemployability. Rather, key reasons for this circumstance may be found in how well-prepared workplaces are to address the employment support needs of individuals with disabilities. The research cited above suggests that traditional approaches to employment advocacy, self-advocacy, and job development must be augmented with more business-focused strategies. Implications for both job seekers and secondary and postsecondary programs are examined below.

Combining self-awareness of strengths and support needs with knowledge of company operations can significantly enhance the pursuit of the right job and concomitant advocacy for accommodations. Bolles and Brown (2001) advise job seekers with disabilities not to limit their job search to jobs

that are openly advertised. Rather, when there are support and accommodation needs that are not typical in workplaces, the search should be for an employer who needs particular talents that the job seeker possesses. The job seeker must be fully prepared to show a prospective employer how their presence will benefit the company. For the most part, all employers redesign or modify jobs so as to highlight abilities and minimize limitations. Companies respect the fact that two people rarely do the same job in the same exact way. Adjustments are made regularly for *all* workers. It is therefore reasonable for individuals with disabilities to identify how specific workplace supports and accommodations, including re-designed tasks or job processes, can add to innovation and productivity for other workers in the company and, in turn, add value to the larger company environment. Magill (1997) reports that accommodations made for employees with disabilities are often effectively adopted for other workers, contributing to greater productivity for the company overall. For example, a company may adopt for all its workers computer macros that were originally implemented for someone with a mobility disability, resulting in faster keyboarding and increased data entry for all employees.

These concepts suggest several important directions for advocating for and implementing employment and workplace supports. Building job seeker self-awareness is critical. Each job candidate should be fully prepared to discuss his or her strengths, skills, and relevant accommodations or alternative methods for completing work. Employers already arrange accommodations such as job restructuring, job sharing, and alternative methods of providing instruction and training for non-disabled workers. If such accommodations facilitate employee productivity, they are readily made. Thus, *it is especially useful to present the need for accommodation in such a way that the company sees the benefit far more readily than they see the disability.*

Significantly, successful work-based learning experiences themselves can serve as marketing tools to employers. Whether through job shadowing, unpaid work experiences, internships, or paid work, work-based learning offers a safe environment in which to familiarize employers with the assets of youth with disabilities. In addition to the obvious benefit to the youth who learn valuable skills and gain career direction, such experiences help to dispel employers' fears and misperceptions about employing youth with disabilities as well as illustrate how workplace supports and accommodations can ensure individual employee productivity. One study, for example, found that out of a sample of more than 1,500 high school youth who completed a standardized time-limited internship experience, more than 77% were offered continuing employment beyond the internship by their host companies in spite of the fact that there were no expectations to do so (Luecking & Fabian, 2000). These employment offers were consistent across gender, race and primary disability characteristics, suggesting that once these youth are on the job and effectively accommodated, they are seen by their employers as contributing to the enterprise, rather than as defined by demographic characteristics. **Table 1** on the next page illustrates these findings.

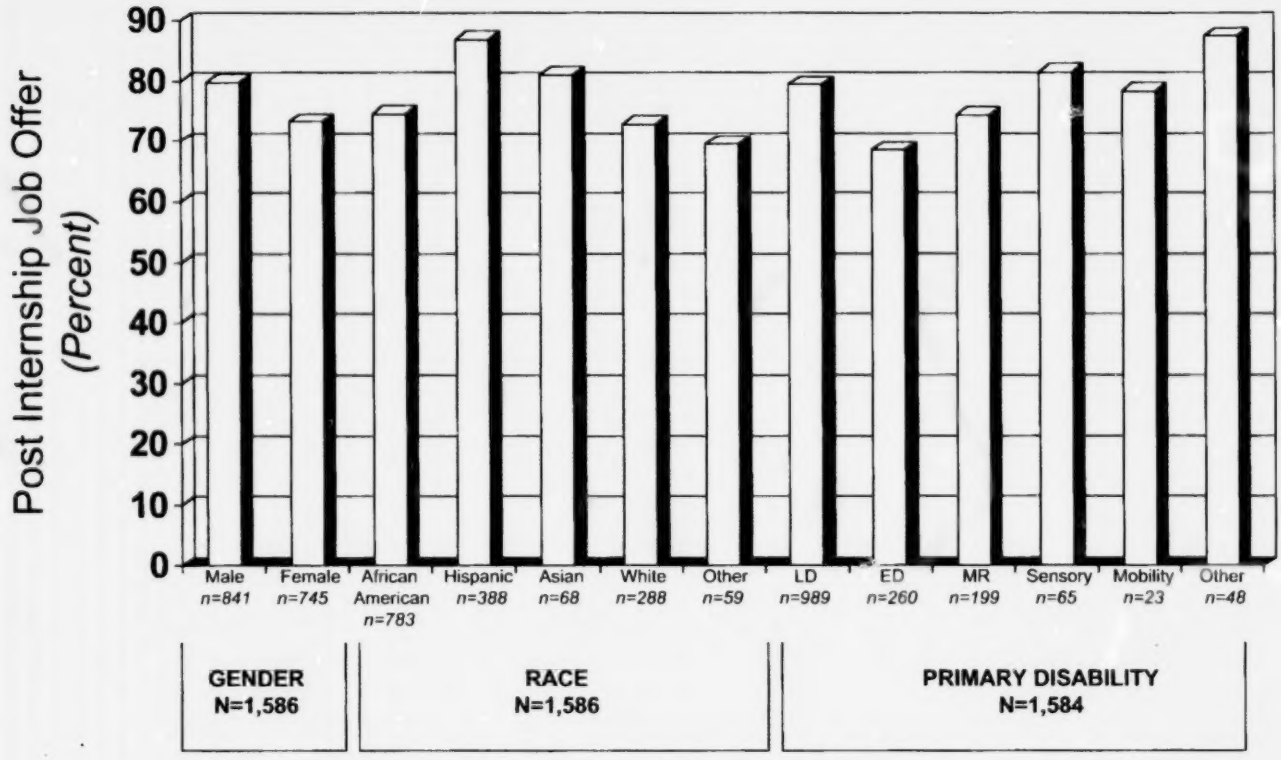
Strategies for Practice

Programs and professionals that facilitate work experiences for youth are in a position to offer employers far more than an increased labor force. These programs and professionals can draw on their experience and expertise in accommodations and job analysis so that employers are able to identify how to provide, adapt, and incorporate necessary supports in their workplaces. The capacity to provide these supports improves the company's overall operational and organizational processes. In turn, when job seekers, educators, and employment professionals become comfortable identifying workplace supports that improve the company, negative employer attitudes toward disability are minimized during the hiring process.

Competencies that benefit both youth with disabilities and potential employers are:

- Identify "return on investment" for companies who participate in work experience programs and hire youth;
- Identify employer needs and market student skills that complement these needs;
- Help manage any changes that might occur as a result of the implementation of workplace supports and accommodations – post placement follow-up is very important;

Table 1: Post Internship Job Offers by Host Company for Interns by Demographic Descriptors



- Identify workplace supports, interventions, and accommodations that also contribute to improvement of companies' overall operational and organizational processes;
- Interact comfortably and productively with employers and speak their language; and
- Make employer participation convenient through well-identified and easy contact and follow-up procedures.

Conclusion

There has been a steady supply of empirical research that underscores the importance of work experiences as integral to secondary and postsecondary education curriculum (e.g., Colley & Jamison, 1998). These experiences also serve to explore and determine workplace support options that will be needed by youth as they transition into adult employment. There can be considerable value to employers who hire youth with disabilities under conditions where there is adequate support both to their operation and to the youth. By developing the skills of youth with disabilities and removing barriers to employment, a community or business is able to prosper and grow. The leadership and participation of employers who support the hiring and accommodating of qualified youth with disabilities serves to expose an important labor source necessary for businesses to thrive and fulfill their labor needs. Once these youth are on the job and workplace supports are effectively in place, the employers clearly value the contribution the youth are making to the company's enterprise (Luecking & Fabian, 2000). When identifying, advocating for, and implementing workplace supports, it is constructive to do so within the framework of company organizational processes as much as in the context of individual support requirements. The result will often be workplaces that are more universally accepting and accessible to youth with a wide range of disabilities.

Resources

Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACS)
http://www.adata.org/dbtac.html
(800) 949-4232 (V/TTY)

Job Accommodations Network (JAN)
http://www.jan.wvu.edu
1-800-526-7234 (V/TTY)

Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA)
http://www.resna.org
703-524-6686 (V)
703-524-6639 (TTY)

Worksupport.com
http://www.worksupport.com/

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This report was supported in whole or in part by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, (Cooperative Agreement No. H326J000005). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, and no official endorsement by the Department should be inferred.

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